

# Parks Comprehensive Plan Task Force

## Meeting Summary January 17, 2007

**Task Force members present:** R.D. Brown, Chuck Evens, Erick Goodlow, Steve Gordon (chair), Maggie Lindorfer, John O'Connell, Brian Pelc, Pete Regnier, Kathy Schubert, Carrie Wasley (vice chair), Jenny Winkelman

**Members absent:** Victor Vang

**Staff:** Bob Biersheid, Vince Gillespie, Mike Hahm, Kathy Korum, Rich Lallier, Jody Martinez, Jess Rosenfeld, Ruth Schumi, Jason Wirka

**Guests:** Greg Mack, Boe Carlson, Jennifer Ringold, Randy Quale, Terry Just

Chair Gordon opened the meeting with introductions of task force members and panelists. Greg Mack (Ramsey County), Boe Carlson (Three Rivers Park District), Randy Quale (Bloomington), Terry Just (Maple Grove), and Jennifer Ringold (Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board) were invited to share their perspectives as providers of park and recreation services in the metropolitan area.

### Greg Mack – Ramsey County

It's important to be close to people and accessible, but the downside is that if access is too easy, facilities become degraded and maintenance of infrastructure becomes key. Right now there is a good flow of capital funding, but not enough for maintenance.

The services provided by Ramsey County are financed through other revenue sources, "enterprises" that generate revenue – that is, golf funds parks. A small portion of the taxes levied by the County go to park. The reliance on enterprises for funding is problematic when enterprises become less popular and start to generate less money (like golf). If Ramsey County is in a particular market (like golf, ice arenas, etc.), they have to deliver services and facilities at a market level in order to be competitive, but there is a policy debate about what level of service should be provided.

There is no charge for general use of park areas. The county's parks and facilities are accessible to everyone, but they are mostly paid for by the golf courses and ice arenas. In tough budget times, parks and recreation providers need to make choices about which services must be cut, and they always choose to cut the services that don't generate revenue. Parking is free; more money would be spent collecting fees than it would generate. There are fees for scheduling pavilions, picnic shelters, etc. (More information on renting Ramsey County park facilities: <http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/parks/parks/rentalfacilities.htm>)

Ramsey County does not do much programming; they provide good facilities close to home, which people use on their own. The county does have nature interpretation

programs and partners with cities for skating. (More information on what is offered by Ramsey County: <http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/parks/index.htm>)

Ramsey County parks do not have their own police force; they rely on the county's sheriffs.

Ramsey County uses volunteers at Tamarack Nature Center, for park clean-up and "Adopt a Park" program, and to groom cross country ski trails. (More information on volunteering in Ramsey County parks:

<http://www.co.ramsey.mn.us/parks/volunteer/index.htm>)

#### Boe Carlson – Three Rivers Park District

Three Rivers is the only special park district in MN, create 50 years ago by the state. It mainly covers Hennepin County, but it has facilities in other counties, too. Its tax revenue comes from Hennepin County, but not from the City of Minneapolis. Three Rivers has four golf courses, one ski area, one winter recreation area at Elm Creek, and 65 miles of regional trails, but no neighborhood park facilities. (More information about Three Rivers: <http://www.threeriversparkdistrict.org/shared/aboutus.cfm>)

Growth is a big challenge for Three Rivers. With more people, there is more demand for services. Land development is happening quickly in the west metro and land values are very high, which has a big impact in on natural resources and preservation.

Changes in how people recreate are also a challenge. As people have less time and their lives are more scheduled, they are looking for more structure in their recreation activities. There is a disconnect between generations; young people don't do the same activities that older people do and some activities are in decline (like cross country skiing). People also recreate on lakes differently than they used to – there is less fishing, less swimming. Three Rivers has developed new facilities (chlorinated swim ponds) and reduced services on lakes. The system also has many horse trails, but as horse riding has declined more modern conversion options are being explored. Dog walking trails and pet exercise areas are increasingly desired.

Acquisitions have been a past priority for Three Rivers, but lots of their buildings are now 15-20 years old and maintenance is becoming more important; expenditure on capital development is shifting to maintenance because they can't keep building and keep offering all of their current services.

Three Rivers has decided to focus on one or two parks for winter activities, as snowmaking is becoming a more necessary part of their program. They choose to provide the best quality facilities in fewer places. (More information on Three Rivers' winter programming: <http://www.threeriversparkdistrict.org/trails/mainski.cfm>)

Three Rivers used to charge a gate fee, so people who used their facilities would either have to be a member of the park district or pay for a daily pass. This policy brought in about \$800 thousand annually, but it was a barrier to access. Now the district operates on a fee-for-service basis, where users pay for what they do (ski passes, boat launch fees, swim pond fees). They have found that this approach is a better way to generate

money than the gate fee, because there is more opportunity for growth. (More information on Three Rivers' fees: <http://www.threeriversparkdistrict.org/fees/index.cfm>)

Volunteers help out with Three Rivers' programs, like races. They had a very structured training program for volunteers, but are reevaluating the necessity of that much training. (More information on Three Rivers' volunteer program: <http://www.threeriversparkdistrict.org/volunteer/generalinfo.cfm>)

Three Rivers has a \$65 million budget, and taxes are a major source of revenue. Enterprise areas generate revenue, too, but they don't support everything else in the system. Three Rivers has its own taxing jurisdiction and bonding authority.

#### Randy Quale – Bloomington

Bloomington operates 96 parks and 9000 acres of land, which is 30% of the city's total land area. The city has many playgrounds, a community center, a Center for the Arts attached to City Hall, and developing a farmers' market. Bloomington does not have any year-round recreation centers.

One of the challenges Bloomington faces is determining the right amount of public input. It's difficult to find the balance between excessively gathering input and making autocratic decisions.

Finding reliable funding sources is another challenge. Infrastructure must be maintained, but there is not enough money to meet the need. The city needs to prioritize what amenities are the most important.

Bloomington offers historic programs, "Arts in the Parks," and other activities. Because needs change, it's important for staff to listen to the community (by doing surveys, follow-up programs, etc.). (More information on Bloomington's programs: <http://www.ci.bloomington.mn.us/cityhall/dept/commserve/parkrec/programs/programs.htm>)

While Bloomington's population is still predominantly white, new populations are growing. We need to change our communities so that everyone has access to the same information (by translating communications, using universal signage instead of words, etc.).

Bloomington has a volunteer coordinator who recruits, trains, schedules, and gives recognition to volunteers. The city as a whole has 1500 volunteers who each give 100 hours average, which would cost the city \$2.5 million. More information on Bloomington's volunteer program: <http://www.ci.bloomington.mn.us/cityhall/dept/commserve/humserve/services/volunteer/volunteer.htm>)

Bloomington also uses enterprise funds, but has found that with some facilities (like ice arenas), the city can either pay debt service or pay for operating costs, but the facility will always need subsidy. The city has found that cell tower leases in parks, naming rights, and concessions leases are good revenue sources.

### Terry Just – Maple Grove

Maple Grove's Parks and Recreation Board is an administrative board that has policy-making authority but cannot levy taxes. There are 1300 acres of parks in Maple Grove's system, and an additional 1700 acres of Three Rivers' parks within Maple Grove. Maple Grove does not duplicate services provided by Three Rivers. (More information on Maple Grove's Parks and Recreation Board: <http://www.ci.maple-grove.mn.us/content/141/193/default.aspx>)

Maple Grove has a strong partnership with the school district. They have a joint powers agreement with every school where Parks develops and maintains playgrounds, ballparks. Some facilities are jointly owned, but Maple Grove does not have to spend much on acquisition.

Maple Grove's large community center benefits a private sector partner, Lifetime Fitness. The community center is only partially owned by Parks, which means that the city collects taxes from the fitness center for their share of the property. The community center's establishment wouldn't have been possible without the fitness center as a partner; the project would have been too expensive. It is a central location for Maple Grove's community activities and programs, and provides a nursery school, ice arena, pool, indoor playground, meeting rooms, and a senior center. (More information on Maple Grove's Community Center: <http://www.ci.maple-grove.mn.us/content/149/1022/default.aspx>)

The high cost of land in Maple Grove (\$300/acre) presents a challenge. Based on these high land values, Maple Grove has the highest park dedication fee in the state at \$6000/unit. The city is now saving up to buy three neighborhood parks.

The number one parks service in Maple Grove is trails. The city trail and Three Rivers 40-mile loop are very popular.

Maple Grove is trying to achieve a balance between providing services and charging fees, but their goal is to always break even on recreation programs. Programs should pay for themselves and their administration. The Community Center does not break even, mostly because the meeting rooms are available to use for free. Naming rights are becoming a big deal in Maple Grove, too.

Maple Grove's volunteer program isn't huge, but it's very helpful. They have a staff member who spends 10 hours/week coordinating volunteer activities. They get a lot of help from National Honor Society for special events, and have a group of seniors that stuff public utility bills. (More information on volunteering in Maple Grove: <http://www.ci.maple-grove.mn.us/content/153/317/default.aspx>)

### Jennifer Ringold – Minneapolis

The Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board is an independent board that can levy its own taxes (although it has to go through the State Board of Tax). It is semi-autonomous; it is still connected to the budget of the City of Minneapolis and the mayor. (More information on the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board: <http://www.minneapolis-parks.org/default.asp?PageID=70>)

Minneapolis' parks and facilities are part of a built system, so there is a big need for infrastructure repair and maintenance. It was also built for a population that was very different from today's demographically diverse population. Minneapolis parks are undergoing a reorganization to try to put staff in closer contact with communities. There are many people who are not being reached. The city is also reexamining how to do research, and the Comprehensive Plan update is the kick-off to the new research plan.

Minneapolis tries to weigh the quality of parks against quantity, and have decided to reduce their system to take out visual nuisances (like tennis courts in disrepair) that the city can't afford to fix up. The city has had a policy of not adding new infrastructure to the system for a while, which limits capital costs but has also put limits on the system's ability to respond to new trends.

In addition to offering a variety of programs (including activities for kids, forestry programs, and a youth employment program) Minneapolis has a strong "Youthline" program for teenagers, where activities are offered at rotating recreation centers. (More information on Minneapolis' Youthline Outreach Mentorship Program: <http://www.minneapolis-parks.org/default.asp?PageID=613>. More information on general programming: <http://www.minneapolis-parks.org/default.asp?PageID=74>)

Minneapolis has about 5000 volunteers, coordinated by full-time staff. They are working on using the internet more to recruit and communicate with volunteers, and are trying to figure out how much training is necessary for one-time volunteers vs. lifetime participants. (More information on Minneapolis' volunteer opportunities: <http://www.minneapolis-parks.org/default.asp?PageID=154>)

Revenue for Minneapolis parks comes from taxes and enterprise funds, but also from contract relationships with vendors (like the Sea Salt and Twin Fish restaurants, boat rental facilities, etc.). These endeavors take some time to get off the ground, but once they are up and running, they are generally well received. Parking tickets issued in parks are now handled administratively so that people who receive tickets are given the choice of paying the ticket (\$35) or becoming a parks patron (\$27). While this arrangement does generate revenue for parks, it isn't always popular because people desire free parking.

Safety is a big issue for Minneapolis parks, and is a significant barrier to parks usage. Minneapolis' park system is patrolled by its own autonomous police force (30-40 officers). The park police have strong relationships with recreation center staff and school security officers. (More information on the Minneapolis Park Police Department: <http://www.minneapolis-parks.org/default.asp?PageID=31>)

**NEXT MEETING:** February 7, 4:30 – 6:30 p.m., at Edgumbe Recreation Center (320 South Griggs Street)